

Not Self

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So today's topic is insight into not-self. And as we've been correlating it with, or connecting it to, confidence, the cultivation of confidence. But all three of the cultivations—stability, well-being, and confidence—are a support for realizing, or the insight of, not-self.

People are often perplexed by this teaching of Buddhism, especially when, instead of calling it not-self, it's said to be no-self. "The Buddhists said there is no self." People say, "But that's not what he said." There is this idea of no-self. If I posit that, it is a philosophical and metaphysical quagmire that you'll never get out of, so go in at your own peril. But there is this teaching of not-self.

So how is that difference? We know self and not-self. It seems to be a popular topic in the West, among Buddhist teachers in the West. And I know that in my early career as a Buddhist teacher, I taught a lot more about it than I do now. There are many reasons for that. One is that it's kind of provocative.

Another is that it speaks to a huge issue in Western culture, especially maybe the more individualistic forms of Western culture, like America, the United States, where the aggrandizement of the self has reached amazing heights, where emphasis on the self is so pervasive in the culture that it's invisible to people who are participating in it. People who come from abroad, like from Asia—I've met people coming from Japan, bringing their kids who are six or seven or five even, and putting them in American public schools—and they're immediately horrified by how the kids are treated. And the example would be something like, meaning something as simple, which seems seemingly innocent enough, as saying, "Well, you know, emphasis, what is your favorite thing?" Or, "What do you most value about yourself?" There are all these ways in which the asking priority is people's own experience, their own opinions, their own place, their own-ness.

And I saw that when I was raising our first son, that I had a kind of completely innocent way of wanting to speak nicely to him, and I would say, you know, he was two or something, “Good boy.” He did something, “Good boy.” And I learned very quickly that that was a way of reinforcing him as an individual, as he had an identity now being a good boy. And, you know, once or twice may be innocent enough, but if you grow up with that reinforcing, that’s what you’re supposed to be. You be identified, you’re recognized that way.

So I switched to, when he did something that was really nice, I would enthusiastically, happily say, “Why, you had so much fun doing that.” Fine enough, I just gave him a different complex. But I was trying to avoid, you know, building an identity around this, that he had to be a good boy to get his father’s approval or something. But if he was wearing his father’s approval, just having a good time, that he was having fun, he was enjoying what he was doing.

And I saw it when I came back from Japan when I was raising my first son. I wouldn’t have seen it if I hadn’t spent time living embedded in Japanese culture, that I was raising him with the values of individualism. I didn’t know that I was. I grew up that way, just as that’s just a structure of the nature of the universe. You don’t see it when you’re just kind of embedded in it.

But coming back from Japan, I saw, wow, this is what I’m doing. I try to, you know, correct for it. I try to make it healthy. But there’s no way of avoiding it. It’s something you have to do, something you have to offer people, some way of organizing who they are in relation to society and the world.

And it can be an individualistic choice. It can be a collective choice. You know, it’s not necessary that one is better than the other, just different ways, maybe equally good, pros and cons. But to become aware of it, to see it, this can be both horrifying, but also it can be enlightening to see why this is what we’re doing, this is how it works.

So some of the emphasis on this teaching of not-self and no-self—not-self—is what Buddhist teachers have done. I think they are also addressing this huge soul, this huge suffering that people have here around the self, the psychological self. And that, I kind of would venture to say, is unprecedented in human history. That’s a pretty significant thing to say. And we’re smack in the epicenter, and we get acculturated by it in deep ways.

So one way to maybe begin this is, rather than talking about self and not-self, is to talk about self-consciousness. I think more often than not, when we use the word being self-conscious in English, I think we refer to its being a way of being self-concerned that trips us up, that somehow it’s a bit of a problem to have it. So, you know, if you’re going to give a talk or per-

form or do something, and you know, “I messed up because I was self-conscious,” and preoccupied with self, preoccupied about what people think of me, whether they like me, whether they reject me, whether I’ll be a success or not. And if you have too much self-consciousness in a situation where the best thing to do is to be completely involved, absorbed in what you’re doing, you know it’s hard to perform. It’s hard to do what you’re going to do.

And, you know, imagine Stephen Curry. You know, it’s the championship game, and teams are tied. It’s the last game of the season, and there’s thirty seconds left, and he’s dribbling down the court, one last chance, maybe to get the team one point back, right? So they’ll lose if he doesn’t make the basket, and he’s about to make the shot, and then he realizes, “You know that high school girlfriend that I had? You know that we had trouble in high school, and she was a lot, you know, she messed me up, and she’s out there in the bleachers watching me. I’d better do a good job here. This is the one. I know if she’s there, I know she’s watching.” Chances are he’ll miss the shot.

That kind of self-consciousness, you know, in that kind of situation, you won’t let go of that kind of self-concern. Just really be there for the event, and let the deeper kind of subconscious intuition and operating system operate. So it’s easy to see that self-consciousness can often get in the way, and it can be very stressful to have a lot of it.

And I think sometimes people do things, something like bury themselves in a book that’s absorbing, or even watch a movie or something, is that it takes them out of their self-consciousness. And when that kind of self-conscious preoccupation is not present, it actually can be quite calming and de-stressing, because the self-consciousness can keep a kind of stress going.

We’re going down, you know, here to the beach, you know, being on the sands and looking out across the vast Pacific, and watching those waves, and kind of being in awe that these waves have been washing across these shores for hundreds of thousands of years, and these waters have been coursing through this planet for billions of years. Just watching the waves come, and the scale of it all, both in terms of spatial scale and temporal scale. And be there long enough, and the world disappears, and no one’s watching you watching the ocean. You’re alone on the beach, and all concerns of, you know, being a successful beach watcher, wave watcher, have disappeared, and they’re just even watching the waves with no self-consciousness.

And it can be quite peaceful and settling, and just content, that part of the world, that concern has fallen away, not involved. And it’s great when people come to meditation, sometimes they run into their self-consciousness. Some people confuse mindfulness with being

self-conscious. And occasionally I've met people who seem like what they're cultivating and trying to do in mindfulness is better and better self-consciousness, just like, you know, because that's how they study themselves, look at themselves, and note all about me and being self-conscious.

Or, you know, we sit and meditate, and the self-consciousness around performance anxiety, you know, "Am I doing it well enough? Am I successful enough? Am I doing it right? I can't do it." And I certainly have had that in meditation. One of the great ones is the thought, you know, "I can't do it." Really be caught up in, "Yes, I can't do this meditation thing." Guess what? If you're thinking that repeatedly over and over again, then it's true.

It's a self-fulfilling prediction, or self-fulfilling statement, because it's a very kind of being caught up in that self-conscious concern and judgments and contraction, and "I can't do it." That itself is not meditation. So if that's where you're caught, you know, it becomes true by the very nature of doing it. If you didn't do it, if you didn't have those thoughts, then maybe it isn't true. Then, you know, that's not getting in the way.

So this way in which being self-conscious gets in the way is something that I think, when we meditate, we encounter. Sometimes it's easier to see this in meditation, because meditation is not inherently fascinating automatically, and it's not inherently dangerous. So if it was one of those two, it would have our attention. But, you know, until you know—certainly there are times when it's fascinating and good—but, you know, just a general person sits down to learn to meditate, it's like, you know, the breath. What? Why that? You know, breathing. You know, I close my eyes when I could be watching *Game of Thrones*. What's going on here?

And so the mind has, you know, we can make fantasies which are much more fascinating for ourselves and much more dangerous for us, you know, than watching our breathing. But the advantage of what happens is that in doing something very simple—breathing, walking meditation—it begins to highlight how our operating system works, how our thought or self-consciousness, our preoccupations, our preferences, desires, aversions operating, come into play. They are seen much more clearly than if we're doing something which is fascinating and wonderful or entertaining or fun. Then, you know, all of us can probably get more concentrated if we do something really fun. But then we don't learn about ourselves. We don't see how it all works.

And one of the things we start seeing is how self-consciousness works, performance anxieties and success concerns, and trying to, you know, all the stuff that goes on. And if that's seen, then the idea is hopefully to let go of it, or to get absorbed, engaged in doing this meditation in such a way that we lose our self-consciousness in doing it. And that's one of the reasons

why confidence is an important feature. When we do things with confidence, we do it without a lot of self-control, being self-conscious about it. We have some sense of mastery: “I can do this,” and so on.

To be thinking, “I can’t do it. Here’s how I can do it. I hope people think I can do it.” You notice all this thought. We know we can do it. And I remember when I was assigned to the kitchen in the monastery, I didn’t know how to cook, really, and I was pretty self-conscious about it. And a year later, still in the kitchen, I could do it without any self-consciousness.

And then I went to work at a restaurant as a cook, and I could just get it. I got it. It was really lovely because I could just get absorbed in the work without there being any self-consciousness about myself, me, and mine. And I would leave a very busy, confessed food restaurant calmer than when I came because I’d learned to engage with a certain degree of mastery and unself-conscious engagement in the work. And so the stress of self-consciousness didn’t build up.

So I like to do walking meditation and do it so that we really do it, really in it, with confidence, with engagement, without self-consciousness, so that it’s just walking. The walk walks itself, rather than, “Should it be the left foot or the right foot now? And are my toes too far out and to one side? And, you know, was it the right amount of weight I was putting down? And, you know, certainly the big toe should come before the big toe down. And, you know, which toe? And those teachers didn’t say which, or what to do with those toes. And I have to figure it out for myself, but I can’t figure anything out. And, you know, I’ve already spent three walking periods trying to figure out which toes go down first.”

And now, you know, we kind of tie ourselves up in knots. But to just engage in something, stand, become the walking, enter the walking, and have such mastery over it, such involvement, we get absorbed in it, and there’s no sense at some point where you’re doing it with a sense of me doing it. Even like reading a really good book, and you get absorbed, and it’s just doing the book. Or you’re doing play, you know, if you’re playing with friends, some kind of game, or dancing or something. You get involved, and time disappears, you know, time goes really fast, and you’re not thinking about yourself, and just the joy and the fun of something, and so you’re just there.

And so with walking meditation, just there, and that’s all. That whole world of self-consciousness drops away. It can feel like a relief. It can feel like a certain kind of freedom. You feel very peaceful. I can feel that supports concentration, and I’m just here.

So, you know, what’s nice about walking is that it doesn’t take too long to master it. You

know, most of you can walk. I notice I've been watching some of you walk, and in fact you can walk. I have no doubt about it. I have a lot of confidence in the people I'm seeing in this retreat, how you walk, and you can really do it well.

So, you know, just trust it, and have confidence in your walking, and just enter into the walk, and just walk, just be there, and know. So what happens when we start getting unself-conscious? It opens up new possibilities for the mind. The mind's not crowded with self-concern, and it allows for a deeper letting go, allows for seeing deeper things about ourselves. It also allows for other nice factors to arise: concentration can arise, joy can arise, delight can arise, a flow of energy can arise.

A variety of things can happen that are blocked sometimes if we're really concerned a lot about ourselves. And also, as we become more unself-conscious, the less we're feeding our clinging, our attachments, our fears, our resistance. And the less and less gets fed, the more unself-conscious we become, the easier it is for things to just drop away.

And some of the deepest things that drop away in practice can only happen when we're so doing the practice—I may be saying writing is not the right word—but we're so absorbed in doing, just doing the practice. And it's so ordinary that it's as ordinary as brushing your teeth. Because as long as you think this is special, as long as you think that this is wonderful, "You know, I'm concentrated, and, you know, I'm going to be great things, and one more step in this practice, it'll open up, and I'll get that medal that they give meditators," you know, something, you know, that's self-conscious, and expecting something, or wanting something. You know, all that is extra.

But when it's like brushing your teeth, maybe, you know, you just do it without any self-consciousness, without any concern. You know, not, "I brushed that tooth in a praiseworthy way." You know, you just brush your teeth or something. And then something can happen that cannot happen if we're self-conscious, and even in the subtlest kind of ways.

So one of the things we're looking for, you know, eventually, maybe not today, but as we're looking to get into a kind of just to get more and more involved, just do the practice. Get there and do it. Don't look too much for results, because that's being self-conscious. Don't look for how it's all wrong. Just do it and get absorbed, get connected, and just follow it, trust it, trust it really deeply.

Sooner or later, that's what's going to happen if you do practice. And the path there is a noble and wonderful path, and so being confident is very supportive for that, with a kind of confidence that itself disappears as we do it. Initially, we might say, "Well, I have a lot of

confidence, I can do it.” But if we keep thinking, you know, if Stephen Curry is there at that last shot in the championship game, and he kind of, “Yes, I have a lot of confidence,” he’s going to miss the shot, right? So he has confidence, but the idea of confidence disappears, you know. It becomes invisible.

And so, you know, everything kind of recedes. But, you know, someone from outside might see that person as confident. The idea of no-self, this unfortunate term, has supported enough people to think that to be a good Buddhist, you have to somehow be self-effacing. You have to make yourself smaller, like you don’t really count. You can’t really show up. You can’t inhabit this world. You can’t take your seat.

And that’s completely not the case of the Buddha, who is supposed to be an example of where this practice goes. He was an eminently confident person. Not only was he very confident about himself, he had a very clear understanding of who he was, of his capacities, and he was not shy when it was appropriate to tell people. He held his own in talking with kings and the other luminaries of his time. He didn’t cower, he didn’t stand down, he didn’t necessarily assert himself, but he did speak sometimes very confidently, in the dramatic language of his way.

He spoke with confidence, and some of his disciples spoke with confidence. They would give their lion’s roar. Have you ever heard a lion roar? I once had a lion roar at me at the zoo, and he was probably—I was holding my little son, he was small enough there, you know, I was holding him—and there were big bars between us and the lion, but the lion was probably only four feet away or something, and we were looking at it all. The lion opened its mouth and roared, and I felt that the earth was going to open up and swallow us. I mean, that was like—if anything deserves respect, it was that roar.

And my response to that, I pivoted and left. I had been informed why that was quite the thing. So the Buddha had his lion’s roar. And Arahants’ roar was about their attainment: “I am free.” So this is not the religion, it’s not a model of becoming small, self-effacing, as if you don’t count and you’re supposed to be invisible and anything like that.

But it’s also not a religious tradition that emphasizes being conceited and arrogant and narcissistic. You know, all that falls away. That self-consciousness and all those things fall away. There’s no narcissism. There’s no conceit, no arrogance. In fact, to have all those qualities is to suffer one way or the other. There’s suffering in that, and so those drop away. But it doesn’t mean that then we’re supposed to kind of, you know, not stand at all or be present.

So what is this not-self about then? One of the easy ways of understanding it is that we latch

on to different things as being, “This is what defines me. This is who I am.” So, for example, I have been making oatmeal this retreat, and the first day I made steel-cut oats. I used the rolled oats recipe to make the steel-cut oats, which means that I used twice as much steel-cut oats for the same amount of water. So I showed up, and rather than having this nice porridge, I had, you know, kind of like a big round solid chunk, more like one very big sixteen-gallon oatmeal cake.

So of course I have now a new identity. I’m a failed oatmeal maker. So how tightly shall I hold on to that? You know, is this my permanent label now? And especially now that I’ve told you all, and you’ll tell everyone else, “Gil, a failed oatmeal maker.” And, you know, this must be my new true identity, and I’ll carry it around with me, and I’ll feel so much shame around being a failed oatmeal maker, and probably I should put a big O on my shirt so everyone can know that. And it’ll be great, because then people will talk about me, and then, you know, it’s kind of painful, but at least I’ll know no one’s forgotten about me, and I’ll be someone.

My fifteen minutes of fame in the world: failed oatmeal maker only. Great. But, you know, I hope you think that to create a self around oatmeal is not a very good recipe for happiness and well-being, or even necessary. It’s kind of silly. In fact, I did save the oatmeal somehow.

So what do we latch on to? And how many things we latch on to are not necessary? Maybe they are even fictions, or not really appropriate. Sometimes when I was in eighth grade, I had an art class, and we were supposed to be drawing something. I think I was drawing my left hand, and that teacher, our teacher, came over and said, “Gil, you have no artistic ability.”

And I had no identity about being an artist or anything, or having had no meaning for me whatsoever, so she was the authority. So I kind of, okay, I guess that’s the nature of the universe, that this is how you know who I am. I have no artistic ability, so I kind of merely happily grew up thinking, that’s who I am. It didn’t have a meaning for me. I didn’t feel bad about it, just like, okay, that’s how it is.

So that was relatively benign till I got to college, and I had a roommate who was a born-again artist, and he kind of got me first drawing, and then into painting classes. And it turns out I had a little bit of artistic ability, enough to take art classes and really enjoy it enough. So actually I became an art major for a very short while.

So, you know, as we get these identities, sometimes very unfortunate ones that our society puts on us, and if it’s put on us when we’re quite young, it just kind of integrates into the structure of our way of thinking. We don’t even see how it limits us, or how it’s even painful for us. And, you know, our families create that for us, and society creates it for us. It’s an idea

of self. They are who we pretend to be, who we're not, and all this.

And now, you can kind of see it sometimes in other people, where people have some idea of who they are that's so painful, you kind of want to shake them. It's like shake it loose out of them because it's so clear that it's not right or healthy to do it. And sometimes it's quite easy to see it when it's done to you, and people see you through a certain identity or a certain way, and you feel belittled. You feel somehow not seen. You feel oppressed by it, you know, and you say, "No, that's not who I am."

Or once upon a time you were grumpy. It just happened once ten years ago. But the person who happened to see you that day, from then on, always thinks of you as the grumpy person, and they can't get beyond it. They don't realize that that one time was just the exception. And so you can, at one point, feel a limitation that you're under.

What's much harder to see is when we do it for ourselves, the identities we have, these ideas we have. And so this is one of the places to learn about these, to undo them, is in meditation. Because these identities, these ideas, are ideas. It takes a certain amount of energy in the mind, activity in the mind, to act, to be active, to be present. They are not effortless in the mind.

Compared to regular discursive thinking, they seem effortless, you know. They're just kind of in the background in there. But as the mind gets quieter, I will go through the inventory of identities that are ideas, that are wind-drag, that are limiting, that are keeping us self-conscious, keeping us activated, rather than allowing a process of calming or settling to happen.

And so if I'm sitting and meditating, and I manage to get to a very nice, serene, peaceful place, and I realize that I'm the failed oatmeal maker, yeah, that's the way it is, you know. I'm sure that's the nature of reality. I've touched the truth, you know. Now I know who I am. The idea of the failed oatmeal maker, it takes energy, takes effort, an idea that has to persist and keep going, to keep fueling it, reminding myself of it. Oops, I forgot, bring it back in.

And in order to keep that, you know, we have to keep picking at that sore, all right? So, oh yes, I'm the failed oatmeal maker. I can't forget that, because then I won't suffer properly. And anyway, so the point being, as we get calmer, we'll see what we're doing more. And it might be I might see a way, but maybe I don't have to do this. Maybe it's not true. Maybe I've overemphasized its importance.

Maybe it has some truth in certain contexts to identities. It's a role. Perhaps it has a place. But actually, I don't have to keep thinking this. And even identities that are not roles, not

activities, you know, like you're a man or a woman or gender nonconforming or something, and you know it is true enough, and no one wants to deny that. But even that can be activated in our mind with a lot of energy, and a lot of concerns, even some attachment or fear or whatever there might be, keeping us activated in that realm.

As we settle, we have to face that and see that, and then hopefully figure out what to do that's wise and appropriate with it. But at some point, if meditation is the path, it's appropriate to put it aside as an activity of the mind. It's not worth thinking about and doing at that moment. So that level of self-concern and that activity settles away, and we can get quieter and deeper.

And, you know, we do that in our normal life as well. You know, you might have a very juicy self-identity that's really great, it's really fun to think about, or important to think about, or, you know, it's really wonderful. But then, you know, it's 11:00 p.m. on April fifteenth, and your taxes are due in fifty-nine minutes, and you'd better not think about this juicy, wonderful identity. You've got to just deal with the taxes. So you pour yourself into it. There's a time and place for things in meditation.

It's, you know, taxes are so important to do, perhaps. But meditation, we don't have anything that's really so compelling. Sometimes it's hard to believe this is really important when we have all these important things to think and solve. And so sometimes it's harder to kind of work through that and let go of it. But sooner or later we see the limitation, and we get more absorbed, or we just forget about it for a while, and we drop into a deeper place.

And then we realize there are deeper identities or deeper ways that we define ourselves or hold ourselves. And it turns out that it's possible to have a period of time where those are not operating at all. It doesn't mean we've rejected them or denied all of them or said they're untrue. It's just that, you know, we're taking a break from that, a little vacation, a little alternative, because it doesn't have to be all the time that we're concerned with self-conscious concerns. And in fact, there might be some very important things to do besides, you know?

And this is also normal in life, you know. Some people exercise, and some people, when they do vigorous exercise, during that time they're just fully in the exercise, and there's no room for thinking about your favorite identity issues. But, you know, that's just temporary, and you know you're coming back to them, so it's no problem. But sometimes with meditation, it's a fascinating world, you know, it looms up more important, because meditation doesn't seem to be offering you much. And so it's harder to be willing to put it aside, put it aside, put it aside.

So the teachings of not-self have a lot to do with recognizing that some of the things that we identify with do not qualify as who I really am. I don't have to hold on to this as the defining definition of me. It might be a coat that I wear. It might be a label that's useful. It doesn't have to be rejected entirely. But there's something freeing about seeing, "This is not who I am," or "This is not how I need to be defined."

Or it might even be better not to add the word I at the beginning. This state of awareness doesn't need to be identified in relationship to anything. This moment of mindfulness, this act of being mindful, doesn't have to be related to a me that's being mindful, doesn't have to be related to a me that's being observed. It can just be a moment of being mindful.

And some of you may have had the experience of being mindful of pain in a knee or some place, and can see how much simpler it is, and actually easier sometimes, to view the pain as the pain instead of my pain. Sometimes there is something about the my that is a magnet for contraction, a magnet for all kinds of other ideas we have about self, all these identities and issues that we have. But without the my, that magnet is not there, and the situation is a lot simpler.

And this willingness to become simple, this willingness to not always use the view of self, me, myself, and mine temporarily, to put it aside, to be unself-conscious, to not have the stress of self-consciousness, the activity of selfing. And so we find that as the mindfulness gets stronger, it's possible to view a lot of things about ourselves without any association of me, myself, and mine. There can be a thought. A thought arises, and it becomes clear. You can see clearly, "That's a thought, but that's not me."

I don't need to be defined by that, you know? So, for example—I mean, some of you have done this before. I should come up with a better example, a new example. But, you know, if I say, "The hills are alive with the sound of," most of you will probably fill in the last word. And when that word popped up in your mind, music, was that you? Are you defined by that? Is that your true nature? Is that your identity in that word? You know, your mind was operating impersonally, just on automatic pilot.

So you see there's a thought. Oh, just a thought. The thought arises. I don't have to identify with it. I don't have to say it's mine or me. That's not me. And then we can ask, well, who am I?

So we look around, and at some point, when the mind is very clear and things are still, everything the perception lands on, without exception, is seen: that's not self, that's not self. There is an emotion, a sensation in the body, a sound outside that just stopped. Now there

is—that's not me, just a sound. And so everything is, you know, and to kind of end up with this very settled, confident place of well-being, and it is crystal clear that anything, any particular thing, your perception, what you see, touch, feel, anything that's actually experiential in the moment, that can actually be experienced or seen, it just simply doesn't qualify as the self. That itself is not-self.

So the expression not-self is always in relationship to something which is not self. When people say there is no self, that just is not in relation to anything. That's just a philosophical claim that something is not there, and that is a philosophical quagmire. How does that work? We're saved from philosophy by just recognizing that anything that we can directly experience in the moment of deep practice is not-self, not-self, not-self.

It can be a little bit frightening if we need this definition of self to feel safe in the world. But hopefully, over time in meditation at least, we learn to relax and relax and trust. That's why confidence is so important: that we have the confidence to stay alive, breathing, present, without positing or building or holding on to anything as the self.

It would be like looking out across the ocean and the waves, and all self-consciousness goes. As we're there sitting and watching the waves of experience, sitting meditating, all self-consciousness disappears. Nothing is that. Nothing is taken or assumed or picked up as the self. It's phenomena, empty phenomena rolling through, as the saying, empty of self, empty of self-definition and self-clinging, just phenomena coming and going.

Does that mean that there is no self? Better not go there. I don't need to answer that question. The Buddha did not answer that question. He was asked point blank, "Is there no self?" and he just refused to answer the question. And he actually said explicitly that to claim there is no self is a quagmire. To claim there is a self is a quagmire.

So what's left? Just don't bother with either one, but have insight, see clearly. And so then all direct experience—there's no self. Any self that's posited or theorized or claimed outside of direct experience belongs to the world of concepts and ideas. It can't do otherwise, can't exist in any other way.

And some of those ideas are appropriate, are useful. So we just get around a little bit, you know, and don't bump into each other. And like we've very successfully given all of you identities for this week. There are pot washers and dishwashers and vacuum cleaners and bathroom washers and, you know, outdoor sweepers and vacuumers. And you come to a room, and we give you two identities, you know, the *saṅgha* service and the work meditation time.

We have a big event: come and acquire new identities. So it's useful. It's just a kind of useful way to get around. I'm sure we can construct it a little bit differently. And rather than say pot washer, we just think, you know, just refer to everything by the activity. Maybe I already do that, but pot washing. And I'm not a pot washer, but I'm involved, you know, there's pot washing going on in my shift.

But, you know, you have to use a lot of words if you want to try to be kind of, you know, Buddhistically cool. And so it's just easier to say, "I'm a pot washer." What do you do? "I'm a pot washer," you know. Then we can kind of go on, figure out what to do. But, you know, it doesn't really matter.

But I hope that most of you have not really latched on to this as your true identity. Then you're going to leave *IRC* and take it with you, and, you know, buy the clothes that are suited for this identity and bless the world. You know, it's just a temporary thing, and so it's useful. So once we get into the world of concepts and ideas and how we navigate around the world, identities are useful. Identities are taken on, and identities are used to harm as well. It both facilitates and it hinders.

To have learned to let go of it all, to find this wonderful place where we're not playing the self game, gives us a vantage point to really see clearly the birth, the adoption, the engagement with these ideas and concepts that involve self, and then hopefully gives us a lot more freedom to operate in that realm, to pick up identities when it's useful, to put them down when they're harmful. And kind of, you know, it's a little bit of a game of improv, all this. And we've learned to play improv well with these identities we have, and we hold it lightly and wisely.

I believe it's much harder to improvise, be light and wise and compassionate with all these identities that we can have if we ever think that this is who I really am, that we're stuck and fixated on this, attached to it. So it's actually a very powerful thing to be able to enter into the world of meditation and mindfulness and practice seeing and being mindful and aware of what's here. And just do it thoroughly and fully, and over and over again. Be forgiving that we're self-conscious. Be forgiving that we're, you know, not fully seeing not-self yet. There's a self operating. It's okay, not a crime.

And just we practice, and we practice, and give ourselves, and see, and trust it, build up confidence. And then, over time, we can learn how to become simpler and simpler and simpler, and just here, just here breathing, just here walking. And we start to, by degrees, become more and more familiar, and maybe comfortable, with what it's like to breathe, to be present without positing, holding on to ideas of self.

So I'll end with the question, who are you? When you don't use thoughts to answer the question, you don't really have to answer the question. But maybe that experience of being alive and breathing here that has no thoughts to define it, explain it, maybe there's some freedom in that place. Maybe it's a freedom that can support your practice here.

May you trust your practice. Be confident and see where this practice takes you. Thank you.